NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH BASED WEBCAMS

Bringing Community Oriented Policing Strategies and State of the Art Technology Together to Fight Crime

by

Brian M. Vizzusi
Lincoln Police Department

March 2009

COMMAND COLLEGE CLASS 44

The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it- creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH BASED WEBCAMS

Bringing Community Oriented Policing Strategies and State of the Art Technology Together to Fight Crime

Introduction

Through much of the first decade of this Century, police departments across the nation have been faced with having to do more with less as a result of the downturn in the economy, shrinking budgets, and rising personnel costs. Doing more with less is not an easy task considering the increased sophistication of criminals, gang activity, and drug use across the country. Police leaders are carefully examining options to assist them in achieving their mission of keeping their communities safe.

One solution to the problem of having to do more with less is to use two proven crime-fighting strategies together to maximize the positive measurable outcomes. Harnessing the effectiveness of Neighborhood Watch with the use of Closed Circuit Television systems can extinguish some crime in public places and enhance the value of both programs if used in a public-private partnership between residents and their police. On the pages that follow, we'll look at the development of both crime-fighting tools, and then we'll see how they can be merged to enhance their impact on crime.

Neighborhood Watch- It does impact crime

Since the days of Sir Robert Peel formed the London Metropolitan Police District in 1829, we have used the same principles; using geographical areas of patrol called "beats", a centrally located headquarters, using crime rates to determine effectiveness,

and having a high value on recruitment, selection, and training.1 Chief amongst Peels' Principles were "the police are the public, and the public are the police."2 Peel's Principle directly relates to the most prominent citizen-led program in policing; the system of Neighborhood Watch groups in towns and cities across the nation.

Neighborhood Watch is one of the primary community crime prevention programs in the United States. 3 Neighborhood Watch empowers neighbors to watch out for each other, to be alert to day-to-day happenings in the neighborhood, and to call the police when anything suspicious occurs. 4 Regular meetings between neighborhoods and officers assigned to patrol these areas are critical to exchange information, make plans, allow for community contact, and provide some feeling of empowerment. This empowerment allows a stronger sense of social control for both the citizens and the officers.

Statistics have shown that proactive law enforcement and community crime prevention programs such as Neighborhood Watch are more effective in reducing crime than reactive programs. 5 The reason why Neighborhood Watch is so effective is because citizens who live in each neighborhood are the ones who really know what is going on, and are most likely to be the first to see a crime and call for help. Citizens also see things such as code violations, unsafe street conditions, and other things that degrade the quality of life in their neighborhood.

The National Sheriff's Association created the Neighborhood Watch program in 1972 to unite law enforcement agencies, private organizations, and individual citizens in

4

a concerted effort to reduce residential crime. Since that time, over 2,800 law enforcement agencies and 25,000 community groups are involved in Neighborhood Watch in 30 different countries around the world. 6 Neighborhood Watch focuses on residential crime prevention programs in which individual citizens work to 1) make their own homes and families less inviting targets for crime, and 2) further cooperation with law enforcement through block and neighborhood groups to control crime throughout the community.

Although Neighborhood Watch has a solid foundation to build upon, it is time to re-think how we might re-shape it to become even more effective keeping our neighborhoods safe, secure, and crime free using available technologies.

Using Technology to help Fight Crime

With the popularity of home computers, laptops, personal digital assistants (PDA's), interactive video games, self check-out kiosks, and other similar tools, most Americans find it appealing to use technology that assists them in their daily lives. A recent development is the increasing use of surveillance cameras by citizens to view their homes and personal property to increase their safety. These systems are becoming quite popular, even to first time home buyers.

Using web-based cameras to watch not only their homes, but their neighborhoods while in the comfort and security of their own homes extends on both the sentiment of traditional Neighborhood Watch, and the increasing use of technology for self-protection. According to Don Moura, a Neighborhood Watch member in Lincoln California, "It's a

no brainer. Of course we would do it (monitor cameras via the web) if such a system existed. Most the residents in this City are good people and are willing to help the police in any way that they can." In some communities, cameras are already in place for a variety of reasons. In others, there will be expenses to install CCTV systems that can be used for this purpose. One of the traditional objections of police remote monitoring has been "the government" watching. With this approach, neighbors can watch over one another, and only involve government in cases where there is an actual need.

The goal of this network is to increase the number of eyes and ears in the community and reduce the need for police resources. With cameras placed in shopping centers, parks, town centers, and public places, criminals will be less likely to commit crimes of opportunity because of the increased risk of being identified and apprehended. With this, the public sense of involvement will increase, and the fear of crime will be diminished as citizens feel more secure with cameras being used to help those that help the police.

In the United Kingdom (UK), webcams are used extensively to monitor public places for criminal activity. A neighborhood in London, England, currently has 300 webcams, which allow police to watch the streets of their own crime-plagued neighborhoods around the clock There is one camera for every fourteen people in Britain, and most people don't mind. Richard Thomas, Britain's Information Commissioner, believes that his country may well "sleep-walk into a surveillance society". 7 After the 2005 bombings in

London where surveillance cameras led to the apprehension of the suspects, most citizens there feel safer because of the cameras.

Although the UK uses police-monitored webcams, they do not have a history of getting their citizens involved in helping to fight crime like we do in the United States. By having citizens monitor the cameras, the awareness of crime increases, as does the understanding the crime problems are community problems, not just police problems. In fact, there are so many applications for a Neighborhood Watch based webcam systems, some communities are becoming very creative in how they are being used.

In June 2006, the State of Texas authorized the installation of hundreds of night vision enabled webcams along its Mexican border. Now, concerned citizens can monitor the streaming video footage for illegal crossers and even call a toll-free number to report them to local law enforcement "It's no different from a regular neighborhood watch program," said Rachael Novier, a spokeswoman for Texas Governor Rick Perry. 8 Perry's Texas is not the first to employ video technology in the form of community surveillance. Several large cities have installed webcams to reduce crime, including Baltimore, Denver, Boston, and San Francisco. In San Francisco researchers found that theft were reduced by 22% in the area where cameras were installed. 9

While most law enforcement professionals believe camera systems are a deterrent to criminals, others believe it is "big brother" watching them. Mark Schlosberg, a Policy Director with the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California, believes that public surveillance cameras violate citizens Fourth Amendment protections against

having "reasonable expectations of privacy". Although judges disagree, Schlosberg contends that California cities like Corona, Brentwood and Oakland that use video surveillance cameras are violating the rights of their citizens on a daily basis without oversight or any protections. 10

Although webcams cost money, they are less expensive than funding police officers. A one position camera system can be purchased and installed for less than $5,000. The cost of a fully-equipped police officer, including salary and benefits can cost as much as $142,000 a year. Webcams cannot be used in lieu of police officers, but can be used as "force multipliers". Having a number of citizens monitoring cameras in several Neighborhood Watch blocks throughout a community with just a few hours of training would be extremely beneficial. It would help reduce the need for high levels of random patrol in each beat or Neighborhood Watch area. With the potential for success this offers, one might wonder why it isn't already commonplace. One reason is reluctance on behalf of the police to innovate and change without a compelling reason.

Why your police organization should adopt this new model

Why do the police seem to settle for status quo? Why are they so entrenched in doing what they have been doing for years? These are interesting questions that are difficult to answer. There are many reasons why there has been a reluctance to change direction in policing.

One reason that there has been little change is that the current system of random policing does produce results, but it is dependent upon a number of factors. The results are indeed questionable, but many political leaders believe these results are acceptable. According to the Mayor in the City Lincoln, "Government does not tolerate much experimentation and calculated risk taking, especially when it comes to policing. We want to use proven methods that deliver proven results." In fact, one of the core functions of field policing has been suspect for almost 40 years.

In 1972, the Kansas City Police Department conducted a Preventative Patrol Experiment where the city of was split into thirds to assess the impact of police presence and activities. In what became a landmark study, Kansas City found the mere presence of routine patrol in marked police cars did not affect crime. 11 Not only did the study show that crime did not increase when visible patrol was removed, but that the public's feeling of security was not diminished. Although the focus of the study was to determine the impact of officer activity (e.g., writing citations and conducting formal field interviews) it relates to the concept of staffing CCTV with NW members in many ways. Perhaps the emerging data on the use of this approach will change the minds of some who may yet hold firmly onto the past.

Moving to the new model

The new model of policing first involves developing a strong network of Neighborhood Watch groups. The second part involves connecting neighbors with neighbors, and citizens with police, through a webcam system which would prevent

crime and apprehend criminals. According to the National Crime Prevention Council, of the eighteen studies conducted to measure the effectiveness of Neighborhood Watch, 78% of the studies demonstrated positive effects of Neighborhood Watch. 12 Although none of these studies involved the use of cameras, the more tools citizens are armed with the better.

Webcams would deter criminals who would otherwise take advantage of our community members. In Newark, New Jersey Mayor Corey Booker installed 109 cameras in a 7-8 square mile, high crime area and got immediate results. "We've experienced a dramatic overall decrease in violent crime. In 2008, a 40% reduction in murder, and a double digit reduction in shootings", Booker said. 13 When crimes do take place, police would have a strong investigative tool to use to help solve those crimes. Video evidence is extremely valuable both for apprehension and prosecution of law violators in our criminal justice system. In the United Kingdom (UK), several studies have been conducted as to the effects on crime where video cameras are installed in public places. The studies in the UK show that crime was reduced by as much as 25% in the two years following the implementation of video surveillance cameras. 14

Using webcams, and coordinating their monitoring by neighborhood watch groups via an Internet site, would strengthen the connection of the community and the police. Citizens want to help fight crime in their communities, but often times they do not have a means to do so, or they do not know how to. Neighborhood watch members would have

a strong purpose and would feel empowered to help the police in a significant, measurable way that produces results.

The cost of a wireless camera system is very inexpensive and can be paid for by the neighborhood watch groups in each part of the city. In speaking to several Neighborhood Watch Block Captains in Lincoln, California, they explained that they believe a camera system in their neighborhoods would increase the quality of life and thus increase the property value of their homes. The new generation cameras are very small, easy to install, and of very high resolution. Some systems have options such as pan and zoom, which often times can be very valuable to the viewer and the investigator using the cameras for apprehension or for court purposes.

There are a number of systems currently on the market that are self-contained. This means that the power supply, usually a battery, is included. A flash drive is commonly used to record activity, and a motion sensor can start the camera and alert the person monitoring that there is activity. Some of the camera systems can actually take photos while the crime is in progress and can alert the suspects by a pre-recorded voice that they are being filmed.

Since random patrol delivers random results, having a neighborhood watch webcam system can minimize randomness and enhance the presence of law enforcement on the street. Having "virtual police" who are citizens monitoring the neighborhoods, street corners, parks, schools, public buildings, and "hot spots" can prove to be very beneficial. Instead of having expensive police officers patrolling randomly, there are eyes on every

corner. When something looks unusual, the police are only a phone call away. In times of declining economies, a neighborhood watch based webcam system can help offset the negative effects of reduced staffing. Other costs such as fleet maintenance, fuel, overhead, and supervision can also be reduced.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, there are a number of other benefits of the neighborhood watch based webcam system other than crime prevention or reduction. This includes a reduced fear of crime, aid to police investigations, quicker response to medical emergencies in public places, general location management to reduce fights-monitor traffic flow-public demonstrations-look for lost children, etc., information gathering, diffusion of benefits-reducing crime in more areas than just where the cameras are present. There are several objectives, though, that must be accomplished so the implementation of neighborhood watch based webcams can take place.

1) Educate your department members, community members, and other key stakeholders about the benefits and challenges of implementing such a system

2) Create buy in on the use of the cameras

3) Determine the cost for the network of cameras

4) Identify a funding source

5) Identify the locations where the cameras should be placed

6) Identify a standard of quality and performance for the cameras and related equipment

7) Create a policy addressing how the cameras will be used by your agency and the community

8) Measure the effectiveness of the cameras and equipment

9) Make any adjustments necessary for peak effectiveness of the system and the

prevention and reduction of crime

10) Report results to the stakeholders and community

Conclusion

Now more than ever, the way in which we police our communities must change.

We need a more cost effective approach that utilizes state of the art technology and

proven community policing strategies to prevent and reduce crime across America. By

combining these two important and effective crime fighting tools, the results can be

extremely positive.

Society today is inarguably much more complex and sophisticated than it was even

decades ago. Criminals are using technology to their benefit to commit their crimes. 15

At the same time, police departments across our nation are cutting their budgets and

personnel costs due to the poor economic climate and the rising costs of wages, health

care, and retirement systems. With a neighborhood watch webcam system, the number of

officers required to conduct costly and inefficient random patrol can be reduced. This

would allow officers to respond to more urgent in-progress calls for service and life-

threatening emergencies.

One reason there have not been a number of changes in the way that we police the

American people is we have been policing communities in the way that they have been

accustomed to and have tolerated. Trying new ways of doing things sometimes results in

failure. Failure is something that government has difficulty recovering from, especially when multi-million dollar law suits are involved.

The way in which we police our society must change as our society changes. Our current economic climate may well be an effective change agent that will propel policing into a new and exciting paradigm.

References

1. Patterson, Jeffrey, Community Policing: Learning the Lessons of History (online) accessed February17, 2008, available: http://www.lectlaw.com/files/cjs07.htm

2. Larrabee, A.K., Law Enforcement: Sir Robert Peel's Concept of Community Policing in Today's Society (online) accessed March 2, 2009, available: http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/435980/law_enforcement_sir_robert_peels_concept.html?cat=47

3. Oliver, Willard M., Community-Oriented Policing, Second Edition (2001), Published by Prentice Hall, page 93

4. National Crime Prevention Council (online) accessed February 16, 2009, available: http://www.ncpc.org/topics/neighborhood-watch

5. City of Champaign Neighborhood Watch (online) accessed February 17,2008,available: http://archieve.ci.champaign.il.us/archive/dsweb/Get/Document-1272/Neighborhood%20Watch%20brochure.pdf

6. Neighborhood Watch, a manual for citizens and for law enforcement from the National Sheriff's Association (online) accessed February 16, 2009, available: http://www.usaonwatch.org/pdfs/WatchManual.pdf

7. Britain is "Surveillance Society", (online) accessed February 20, 2009, available: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6108496.stm

8. Neighborhood Watch goes High Tech by Stephen Ornes, (online) accessed February 17, 2008, available: http://discovermagazine.com/2006/sep/neighborhoodtech

9. Crime Cameras Not Capturing Many Crimes by Heather Knight, (online) accessed March 13, 2009, available: http://www.sfgate.com/cgibin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2008/03/21/MN27VNFET.DTL

10. Under the Watchful Eye by Mark Schlosberg, page 7 Published by the ACLU of Northern California 2007

11. The Kansas City Preventative Patrol Experiment, Police Foundation, (online) accessed February 17, 2008, available: http://www.policefoundation.org/docs/kansas.html

11. Does Neighborhood Watch Reduce Crime, National Crime Prevention Council, Research Brief- Published July 10, 2008

12. Preventing Crime With Tech: The Newark Experiment, (online) accessed March 2, 2009, available: http://www.techcrunch.com/2008/08/02/preventing-crime-with-tech-the-newark-experiment/

13. Video Surveillance of Public Places by Jerry Ratcliffe, page 51 Published by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services 2006

14. Higgitt, Commissioner W.L. Policing in today's Sophisticated Society (online) accessed February 17, 2008, available: www.empireclubfoundation.com/details.asp?SpeechID=2173&FT=yes